



Natomas Oral Histories

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Oral interview of

Roger Fong

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Interviewer: Kathy Paparchontis

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This is not a verbatim transcript. Parts of the interview have been paraphrased.

Kathy: This is Kathy Paparchontis interviewing Mr. Roger Fong at his home in Sacramento, California, on October 20, 1996, for the Natomas Project. I think that should pick everything up. Ok? Why don't we start off with your early life?

[00:00:41]

Roger: Ok. I was the youngest of the five children of Sam and Mrs. Eui Fong. I was actually born and raised over in 419 1/2 N Street, where the Regional Bank is — that is between 4th and 5th on N Street right now. I grew up there. In fact, I was just talking with my brother the other day — I was in fact born at home. I didn't realize that. We were kidding because my first son Ronald was born in an apartment we were renting. So, it is kind of interesting that I was born at home. This lady that we talk about — she had bound feet. She was a short little lady. My brother said she hustled over to our house and helped my mom with delivery. I said, wow, that's news because how could she walk? I remember she walked very slow because of the bound feet. Her feet were real small. I remember her since I was a kid because we would always go to celebrate special occasions. In those days we didn't celebrate birthdays, only kids celebrated birthdays; we celebrated birthdays of those at least 50 and older, is what I recall. You always would respect the elders. It was more of a western custom as far as birthdays is concerned. Now we celebrate it with all our kids, but when I was growing up we never celebrated our birthdays. I grew up there. I went to all the local schools. I went to the Lincoln School down there between 4th and 5th on T street. I went to Sacramento High School, and Sacramento Junior College in those days, and I graduated from Sacramento State in 1956.

Kathy: What was your major?

Roger: I was a bus ag major. Majored in marketing, minored in psychology. Athletics is what kept me in school. I was involved in track — varsity team in track is what kept me in college. *[Laughter]* I got my As after when I was taking evening college. I was more focused. In fact, my father told me recently when they had an event over at Sac State University, they honored me as Alumni of the Year just this year. My older sister shared with me that she and our father had a conversation when I got out of high school about me. They were worried because I didn't seem to know what I wanted to be, or have any career goals, any major direction. It was interesting, because I was being honored, and had just run for office as assessor and got elected, but this was after both my mother and father had passed away. It was interesting because they were worried about me, but as it was everything turned out ok. *[Laughter]*

[00:04:06]

Kathy: Typical with most parents.

Roger: Yes.

Kathy: Was it in your family that when you grew up you were going to go to college? Did you have a choice?

Roger: Well, not really. They left us to do whatever we wanted. I don't think they had the high expectations that we have more of children today. Education is very important but they never studied

with us or forced us to study. My father spoke English, and read and wrote Chinese; my mother could read some Chinese, spoke it fluently, but could not read it fluently. So most of the people who came from China in that first generation were not well educated. It wasn't that they were not smart. It just was that they didn't have the opportunity to go to school. Things were so tough in the southern part of China, most came from the T-O-I-S-H-A-N area. That was most of the Chinese people came from, the southern part of China, because it was easier to get into Hong Kong than leave the country when things got really rough in China.

Kathy: Ok.

Roger: So, I went to college only because I was securing an athletic program because I had friends who had run there. They said, why don't you run at City College. So, I ran track there and was successful. They went over to Sac State, so I just went along.

Kathy: I think that is another stereotype, that when kids are born, their parents mentally have them in college.

Roger: Right. True. In those days they were so busy just scraping out a living, working, as compared to worrying about what we were doing all day. We had a lot of freedom. We organized our own teams, belonged to clubs, we ran with our own street gangs and things like that. The only issue of concern was that we go to Chinese School every day from 5 to 7 pm, and on Saturdays from 9 to 12 pm. So, we had a long day. The rest of the kids were out of school at 3 or 3:30, but we had to go to Chinese School after that. We ran the streets and we did what we wanted because they were so busy. We knew to not get into trouble, not because our parents were so strict, but because in those days if your dad said something, you did it without any question. Nowadays, our kids will sometimes question/challenge what we say and we discuss it. Those days, your dad said to be home at a certain time, or you do something, you just did it without any question. I think that was the same for other families. We all lived in the same geographical area, from P/Q to I, and then from the River to 9th/10th street. All the Asians lived in that area. We could live outside what we called the Old City because there were restrictions. You could not own/buy property if you were an alien. You had to be a citizen to own property. Even into the '50s, after we got married, there was still some discrimination as far as renting was concerned. We would look at some places and be told they were full, whatever. It is really ironic today that we own rental property, and I'm the assessor of all real property throughout the county. In those days, it was in the deed, you couldn't own property or buy it. That is why Fong Ranch was in a different name.

[00:07:50]

Kathy: Yes, I read that in that write up there. There is not that much discrimination today now though, would you say?

Roger: What do you mean as far as discrimination? As far as property, probably not, or rentals. There are a lot of laws which if broken the penalties are very severe. We own property and we are very careful about it.

Kathy: There was a time. Things have changed quite a bit.

Roger: Right. I was at the tail end of the Depression, then I lived through WWII and all the other conflicts, Korean and Vietnam. I also served in the navy for a couple years.

Kathy: Did you serve during war time?

Roger: We served — there at the VFW was just a celebration yesterday — during peace-keeping action during the Cold War situation. I was on a carrier — there was always something going on in Lebanon in those days. We dropped off a bunch of Marines into Beirut, Lebanon, then for a show of force. We were over there in case something happened then. I served in '67, '68. I was in the navy.

Kathy: How many children do you have?

Roger: We have five. I'm sorry, five in my family: three brothers and two sisters. We have three children: a son and two daughters.

Kathy: Are they in college?

Roger: Our older son graduated from MIT and Harvard Business School, and works at a real estate development company. A daughter, out of UC Irvine, just started at McGeorge Law School. And a daughter working for the Pepsi Company. They are all basically independent, on their own.

Kathy: Grandchildren, or not yet?

Roger: Not yet.

[00:11:00]

Kathy: Would you like to talk a bit about your career?

Roger: I started in 1956, when I got out college, at the Assessor's Office. Then I went in the navy active duty for two years. When I came out, I worked for a while as a social worker. Then I was just about to finish my probation when I saw the announcement for this exam for an appraiser in the Assessor's Office. At that time, I didn't even know what an appraiser was. I was working at the time with a social worker who was going to take the exam, so I thought maybe I'd take the exam. All it required was a college degree. I took it and was successful. I thought it would be good to have some experience in real estate. It has been very helpful. I started out at the beginning level, assistant real property appraiser, took the exam, got promoted. Every time an exam came out, I would take it. I took all the exams, was successful, and eventually became principle property appraiser, one of the top positions in the office. At that time, when an open seat came up for the assessor, people encouraged me to run for it. I had not planned to run for assessor. It was not a career goal for me. People ask me now, was that what you always wanted to be? I never thought I would want to run for an elected office because you are out in the public meeting people and making speeches; you are meeting people all the time. At the time I wasn't sure that is what I wanted to do. It was kind of intimidating. I didn't think I would want to talk with people and make speeches all the time. I was friendly, but I wasn't sure I would want to do that. I would observe people giving speeches and wonder about memorizing them. I didn't realize that people write those speeches for you and there would be teleprompters. *[Laughter]* That part is easy, but in my job, I write most of my material and then present it — a little tougher. It became a learning experience and I eventually became more comfortable doing it. It has been a wonderful, wonderful experience.

Kathy: I don't know that I could ever become comfortable making speeches.

[00:14:19]

Roger: It becomes easier when you know the subject matter. Sometimes someone will come up to me and invite me to say a few words. I don't think you ever get over the initial fear, but then when you start talking about familiar subject matter, it gets easier.

Kathy: Maybe we could go backwards for a bit and talk about the Fong Ranch. Who were the first Fongs in your life that came over from China?

Roger: Oh, let's see. On my side, you might get that reconfirmed from Russ because he probably knows that side better than I do. On my side, my father was the first one to come over in my family. It was kind of a quirk. In talking with one of my relatives, my father had some extra papers to come. In that day, you had to have papers in order to come. Another person had papers and decided not to come, so offered them to my father to come over. That is how our family came over. He came at a very young age. In fact, we were back in China, we took the kids over four or five years ago to the village where my father came from. Nothing has changed since my father came; he passed away since then. It is just older. They still have dirt floors, they have pigs, chickens in the house. Water from a well outside and they still have outside privies. Pretty humble. They are sort of like earth construction/adobe walls. My daughter said thank god Sam came to America or we'd be working out in those rice fields. They still have water buffalo that they use. We went to my mother's village looking for her house. It looked like the war had gone through. My mother had no interest in going back. The standard of living was very marginal. I was talking with my brothers and sisters — the mortality rate was very high in those days. That is why they celebrate the baby at one month, a tradition in Chinese custom. They gave my dad a nickname initially that meant *dog*. The mortality rate was so high they were afraid to give him a human name because perhaps it would change the luck. He was sickly when he was young. It ended up bringing him luck.

[00:18:58]

Kathy: Did they bring other relatives over?

Roger: Well, in those days, usually there was a fellow in a village who was successful and come over. They would bring others. In our family, there was a gentleman by the name of Fong. Interesting how he came over and was working for the Bank of America — initially it was called the Bank of Italy. He was able to communicate in English, was well-read. He was going to bring all of his relatives over from his village, which was our village. There are a lot of relatives from our village here in Sacramento. Then on Russell's grandfather's side, Fong Sik, brought relatives from his village. So, there are people here from two different villages. They were perhaps more educated, more sophisticated in the ways of American life. They each helped form a church. The church we were at, the Methodist Church was one of the oldest, 130 some years old. The lady missionaries would have small churches in Chinatown and teach English and Christianity. That was how they were evangelized. We actually belong to the same church now. There are a lot of relatives there because of past history. The church helps bring relatives over. When you get into certain towns/cities you have many of the same name there because they would bring relatives over. I'm just the first generation born here in America. My older sister was born in China and came over with my mother.

Kathy: Your parents were married in China.

Roger: Yes, arranged and married in China.

Kathy: It worked out.

Roger: Yes, it seemed to work out. They look at the families. Look at matching traits that would make it work out. My father came over first. He worked for the railroad and then in produce. He went on to work in produce — then into farming.

[00:22:13]

Kathy: His first farmland, how did he get a hold of that?

Roger: His first farmland he was leasing in West Sacramento. It wasn't very big [*Roger checks papers for acreage*]. We go over there. It was about 1925. About 10 acres. My sister used to live over there. My brother was actually born in Sacramento. They would take the horse and carriage to come over here because most of the Chinese population was here.

Kathy: So, then they went in together to buy the [Fong Ranch] acreage?

Roger: Yes. Actually, my father was farming there in 1925. So, he had some experience and equipment, plow, draft horses. They didn't have the big harvester/tractor like they do today. He was approached by Fong Sic about a mutual venture of clearing some land in West Sacramento, so that's how it got started. He was not from our family, we were not related. He was a business man and merchant. I remember him as a kid because he would drive to the farm on a Sunday. Sundays were not work days. He would drive down with his daughter or someone in a huge Chrysler or some other nice car. He would always be dressed like a business man. Always very distinguished looking. He would check out operations with my father. It was probably a good marriage, as far as business. He was educated as a business man and my father had the experience and equipment as far as farming. The two came together; originally 50/50 partners. In return they got land rent free for several years. They had land in Cache Creek. We don't have the papers from when they bought the property. I had a friend check for me with the title company and found out that they bought it in December 1938. I presume they made some money and bought it with the profits from some of these other contracts. That is how the Fong Ranch in Natomas came into being. They always grew alfalfa, tomatoes, sugar beets. They rotated them. During the war years in 1941 — back before that they had Filipino labor, single men from the labor camps. I remember they raised fighting cocks; it was their form of entertainment. They would chip in and buy a nice car and they would share it. They would come into town. Few Filipino ladies in those days. They married outside their race; they didn't have much of a choice. Then itinerate workers from Arkansas came and we hired them. Then the bracero program started. During the war years, labor was hard to come by. Sometimes property was put in sons' names. Farming was part of the war effort; it was needed. Sons would get a temporary deferment. As I look back, I can understand it. We high schoolers, and friends, worked out in the field, for 40 to 50 cents an hour because the labor was so short in the '40s. My mom and her friends would work in the packing shed in town. They would ship all over. My brother and I used to put the labels on. Unfortunately, we don't have a single one.

[00:33:23]

Kathy: Did they get a good price during the war?

Roger: I don't know about price, but they took everything we shipped. They could pick and choose who they chose to contract with. Now farmers band together and can negotiate a price. At that time, these were independent farmers, so I'm not sure about the price. Getting a contract was what farmers wanted. When crops are ready, since it is perishable, you want to ship it out immediately. You couldn't just store it. In the summertime, they are working every day from sun up to sun down. In the winter

they would have a winter crop. Sometimes we would go to San Francisco to visit my sister. We would get excited about going to family gatherings, but that was about it. In those days it was not so complicated. It was very traditional. You would do big pots of thin noodles, freshly killed poultry; we all brought food. Many times, it would just be an event in the neighborhood. We lived in three-story old houses. Now, it is kind of funny, those have become Victorians that everybody wants. I have a friend who is restoring one. A labor of love. *[Laughter]*

[00:37:42]

Kathy: You never really lived in Natomas then.

Roger: I always lived in town, but we would spend much of our free time out there helping out on the Ranch. We have a ranch house that was there on Truxel and San Juan, what would be the northwest corner. In those days, Natomas was only a couple of miles from downtown.

Kathy: My son used to live out there. He could get to town in a minute it seemed! What do you think is the biggest overall change in Natomas?

Roger: The development! We used to go out there and in the drainage ditches fish and get frogs. We'd hunt pheasant in the fields. When you go down Truxel now it is different. There used to be a drainage ditch on the right-hand side. Wide enough that you couldn't jump over it.

Kathy: Amazing. I've not seen before pictures. Since I've been here, it has just been the way it is.

Roger: How long have you been in the Sacramento area?

Kathy: Spring of '71. It was developed at that time.

Roger: So that's a major change. There is a major interchange on the farm. Before it was just open fields, truck farms along the roads. Back further the row farmers were there.

Kathy: So, you remember when they built 80?

Roger: It used to be 880. Capitol City Freeway [80] goes through the city to the Capitol. I think they call it Business 80 now. All the industrial stuff that came in, too. It has been in maybe 15 or 20 years.

Kathy: Do you think the change is good?

Roger: It is hard to harness growth. The bigger issue is that the City watches growth rather than just letting it happen. Nowadays it is a lot tougher. Hopefully we get a better planned community regarding growth. I think they have learned from mistakes. There probably is still not the cooperation we could have when regional planning is being done. We need communication to improve.

[00:43:07]

Kathy: When did the Ranch stop being a ranch?

Roger: It is still being farmed. Alvernaz farmed it for a while and others. It is being leased out on a sharecrop basis.

Kathy: Do you still call it Fong Ranch?

Roger: Yes. We also have a couple of other operations, a mix of partnerships. A food orchard, 290 acres, due west of the International Airport that runs due west to the river. Then another 30-acre ranch near the Fong Ranch, Oi Ling Ranch. It was sold though a number of years ago. Fong Ranch was sold to Lincoln Properties out of Dallas, Texas. The county real estate business wasn't doing very well. \$5,000-plus an acre but they couldn't keep up the payments, so we got it back. A big high school is going up on the property too now. Education is important so we thought we would donate some land for that. Teachers in China were always looked up to, respected. Today it is different, unfortunately.

[00:49:10]

Kathy: Is there anything else we haven't covered that you'd like to talk about?

Roger: Yes. The way I was told, if we start out 50/50 partnership... Every morning or evening we'd meet there to go to work. Or, my dad would go there to pick up provisions, or had bills to pay — down to state market where Fong Sik, who was the original partner, had his office — kind of the headquarters. The office was probably not bigger than my dining room. It was a small place where he worked out of. My understanding was, you know, that times got pretty good I would think because they took a lot of provisions from the market there. That's how they decided to share interest in the partnership with some of the minority interest today. On my side, we are not directly related. We are the only major partners not directly related. Same last name doesn't mean we're closely related. Came from different villages. Perhaps if you go way back, to the Yellow River, there might be some tie.

Kathy: Is Fong a fairly common name?

Roger: It's pretty common, especially here in Sacramento. Lot of Fongs here. I'm actually a K-W-O-N-G, but my father used F-O-N-G because in Chinese it's pronounced the same, actually spelled different, but pronounced the same in English. Since we started using Fong we just kept it. I'm actually a Kwong, if you want to be more specific, more accurate in the Chinese.

Kathy: Yes, I noticed the different names in the report here.

Roger: Yes, like my father here is Kwong Wing How. Then when he changed and used his American name it was Sam Fong. So—

Kathy: I see.

Roger: The Chinese were very specific. When you use a word, it is specific. You know. When you say it in Chinese you know whether it is from their mother's side, or father's side. The older uncle, the younger uncle. It is more specific. Here when you say that is my aunt you don't know on who's side it is on. In Chinese you know.

Kathy: I see.

[00:52:54]

Roger: I have some details here on the pricing. We thought those things are kind of interesting. I talked with you about the history of the property, how it was held in different names because of the Exclusionary Act. So, it was usually taken in a son's name who was a citizen. After they came here they

had children; they were automatically citizens. So, that is how they bought property in those days. Either in a son's name, or in the name of someone they could trust.

Kathy: Yes.

Roger: Yes. That's why ownership if you go back far enough it would be in one name; today it would be different. That's all they did in those days. Work, go home eat, sleep, and go back to work. Most of the women would work in a cannery if there was an off-season and they didn't need them in the field, on the farm, either the Del Monte, Libbey, or Burkett Richards cannery. Since they were not educated, those were the only jobs available. They would work on the production lines canning either peaches, pears, or whatever.

Kathy: Sounds like a lot of hard work.

Roger: Very hard work.

Kathy: Then raising a family at the same time.

Roger: In those days, the oldest daughter, was like a surrogate mother. But then everything was simple in those days. They all lived together; everyone went to school together. All the way from kindergarten up to junior high school. We were close to downtown, walk three blocks to K Street where the movie theatres were there, entertainment. You didn't have to go much farther. You didn't have much money.

Kathy: One thing I don't think we talked about — how did you meet?

Roger: *[To Mrs. Fong]* Oh, go ahead.

Mrs. Fong: *[Laughter]* It was interesting — in class

Roger: We were in the same class. She always sat in front of me. She had a single pigtail — no double.

Mrs. Fong: I remember.

Roger: In Chinese, you know, we have these inkwells.

Kathy: Right.

Roger: Black, black ink. Good thing it was your color hair. Or I'd be in trouble. *[Laughter]* I'd take that pigtail and put it in and swirl it around a few times—

[00:55:57]

Mrs. Fong: My mother said — she's from Canada — that when she was growing up they had the inkwells in school and the boys were always doing that. She had red hair. She'd have to wash that out.

Roger: So even though we went to school together, we never dated. We knew each other. She was a little bit younger. Until you get older, age doesn't matter that much. I had just gotten through with the boxing season at Sac State and I was ready to graduate. I had to have my nose operated on. It was black

and blue. I was boxing on the Varsity team then. In those days, we would go and have a weenie roast at Del Paso Park. You know where the park is, where the baseball diamond is? Watt and Auburn Boulevard.

Kathy: Oh yes, right.

Roger: You drive down the road probably three or four blocks where the park is now—we'd go there at night with a bunch of hot dogs and roast them at night. The park was closed at night but we would go down and use the grills.

Mrs. Fong: That was a big thing back then.

Roger: That was a big thing, going out there for a weenie roast. *[Laughter]* I needed a date, so I asked her. *[Laughter]*

Kathy: Oh.

Mrs. Fong: I happened to be free that night.

Roger: So that is when we started dating.

Mrs. Fong: He showed up that night with his nose all bandaged. I couldn't see his face. I was in Bermuda shorts. We were both a really good match. We had "Bermuda socks." Red socks. *[Laughter]*

Roger: Yes, I couldn't believe it! The masked marvel. That is when we started dating. We dated for quite a few years. Then I went into the navy. We dated when I came back out from that.

Mrs. Fong: I guess we dated about five years.

Kathy: Five years. Oh wow.

Roger: We got married in—

Mrs. Fong: Check your ring dear — August of '61.

Roger: Yes, August of '61. We lived in an apartment — we almost always lived in an apartment.

Mrs. Fong: Yes, we sure did.

[00:58:43]

Roger: We lived in an apartment then over on 27nd Street, then we managed an apartment for some friends over on 16th Street and U Street. Then we built these. In fact, my son was born in the last apartment. I delivered him at home.

Mrs. Fong: I didn't know I was in labor.

Kathy: Was that your first one?

Mrs. Fong: Yes. I managed to get to the hospital. Isn't that weird! We'd taken an American Red Cross class and everything. I often asked, how do you know when the time has arrived? They would say, don't worry, you'll know. I'd seen my doctor that week before and he said, "The end of the month." When I had a little discomfort, I just thought it was something else—

Kathy: So, you delivered the baby.

Roger: Yes. She thought she was constipated. *[Laughter]* Give me an apple. She was always very considerate. She said, well, let's wait until the doctor gets to the office, no use calling him early. We called and they gave us instruction by telephone as to what to do, you know.

Kathy: Yes.

Roger: How you put the baby on her tummy, whatever. Make sure he's able to breathe. Call the ambulance. The ambulance came to the next apartment, apartment number 2. I heard him banging on the door and called to him, "Hey, come over here, you're at the wrong door". *[Laughter]* He came in and said, "I've never done this before. I'm nervous." He was really nervous. I said relax, take it easy. He was really nervous.

Mrs. Fong: I think if anybody should have been nervous, it should be me! It was funny. A funny experience. *[Laughter]*

Roger: He took her to the hospital in the ambulance. I followed in the car.

Mrs. Fong: The doctor wanted to make sure I got to the hospital early for my second one. With the third one, I just didn't have enough time. The baby was born in the waiting room. I didn't have time to get into the delivery room. *[Laughter]*

Roger: Talking about time — with the last one, the bag broke in the car again—

Mrs. Fong: I said, it is time, I'll just have it. So they put me on one of the tables there and I just had it. *[Laughter]* He delivered it there.

Roger: About the fourth one, I asked the doctor, "Do I get a discount? We've never used the delivery room facilities at all!" They charged us extra, because the baby was "contaminated," Kathy!

Kathy: *[Laughter]* So you had to deliver it and pay extra, too!

Roger/Mrs. Fong: Yes.

Kathy: Anything else?

Roger/Mrs. Fong: Can't think of anything.

Kathy: Well I think I'll just turn this off.